



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time A



The Enemy Sowing Seeds by Felicien Rops, 1872

“While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat,
and then went off” Mt 13: 25.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Teach Me Where to Find You

*O Lord my God.
Teach my heart this day
where and how to find you.*

*You have made me and re-made me,
and you have bestowed on me
all the good things I possess,
and still I do not know you.
I have not yet done
that for which I was made.*

*Teach me to seek you,
for I cannot seek you
unless you teach me,
or find you
unless you show yourself to me.*

*Let me seek you in my desire;
let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you;
let me love you when I find you.*

St. Anselm

Catholic
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& Creed**
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Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The parables proclaimed on these consecutive Sundays are intended to proclaim the arrival of the reign of God.
- ▶ Contemporary scholars prefer to use the term reign of God rather than *kingdom* of God. They insist that kingdom refers to location and place, whereas reign alludes to way of life.
- ▶ Today's Gospel speaks of judgment that will come at the end of harvest.
- ▶ Since three different parables are presented in today's Gospel and each is worthy of serious reflection, perhaps today's session might deal more extensively with the questions surrounding the parables and give less attention to the first and second readings (unless of course time is not an issue).

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19

- ▶ Today's reading from the Book of Wisdom is a proclamation of God's mercy and his almighty power.
- ▶ The context of this reading is the second plague that afflicted Egypt during the Exodus.
- ▶ Wisdom asserts that even the Egyptians are heirs to God's mercy in this particular event even though they are culpable of oppressing God's chosen ones.
- ▶ God showers his mercy on the just and the unjust.
- ▶ Egypt deserved God's just punishment but God offered his mercy and an opportunity to repent of their sins.
- ▶ God is merciful because God is also powerful.
- ▶ God in his mercy and power is in a position to extend that mercy to all people.
- ▶ God's power is multi-faceted. God is compassionate, fair, merciful, lenient, and patient but also capable of showering wrath down upon the people. God treated Egypt fairly for its transgressions. According to God's justice, Egypt's sins of idolatry, inhumanity and aggression could not go unpunished.
- ▶ Living according to the covenant that God established with the people of Israel demanded that they offer the same extension of love and compassion to others that God offered to them.
- ▶ If God showed compassion to Egypt and was patient with the children of Egypt how much more will God be patient with the people of Israel—the ones he chose for his own purposes.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the primary message of this reading from the Book of Wisdom?
- ▶ How do you feel about the truth that God presents Egypt with the opportunity to repent even though they were guilty of oppression, inhumanity and idolatry? What are the implications today?
- ▶ How would you feel if God were to offer such mercy to a contemporary sinful nation?
- ▶ How would you feel if God were to offer repentance (and it was accepted) to the worst sinner in the world?
- ▶ What do our feelings teach us about ourselves? What are the implications?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about God’s relationship with us?
- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?

Second Reading: Romans 8: 26-27

- ▶ Today’s reading from Romans continues Paul’s theme from last Sunday’s second reading.
- ▶ Paul reminds us that the Spirit groans within the human person.
- ▶ The Spirit is the first fruit of Jesus’ redemption of the human race. Jesus had to die and be resurrected from death in order for the Spirit to come into the hearts of people.
- ▶ The Spirit invites us into deep, interior relationship with God.
- ▶ The Spirit is our advocate before God as we come before him in our powerlessness.
- ▶ The Spirit walks with us, indeed carries us, in the midst of life’s suffering, joy and challenges.
- ▶ The Spirit prays with us and for us. The Spirit prays when we cannot pray. The Spirit does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.
- ▶ The Spirit constantly is praying on our behalf.
- ▶ The Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves.
- ▶ The Spirit searches our longings, our deepest heart’s desires and groans in prayer deep within the human heart.
- ▶ Paul tells his beloved community that God loves and is faithful to them in ways they cannot even conceive.
- ▶ The Spirit invites, beckons, encourages and transforms the human heart.
- ▶ The Spirit is the transforming agent within the human soul.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ Have you ever experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart? How do you know it was God’s Spirit?
- ▶ How do you know you are following the Spirit of God rather than your own earthly desires?
- ▶ What evidence is there that the Spirit is praying within you?
- ▶ How is this Good News for us today?

Gospel: Matthew 13; 24-33

- ▶ The purpose of the parables in this section of Matthew’s Gospel is to announce the advent of God’s reign.
- ▶ We are presented with three parables in today’s Gospel.
- ▶ Jesus’ created the parables out of the social milieu of his day. He built upon the common, everyday experiences of the people to open their eyes to the advent of God’s reign.
- ▶ Parables use metaphor, image and story to reveal the truths of God’s saving work.
- ▶ Stories instruct in ways few mediums can boast.
- ▶ Parables invite new insight and a transformed way of life.
- ▶ Parables invite us to understand our world in a new way.
- ▶ Jesus invited his followers to learn about God in their own way and their own time. He did not force himself upon the listener. He gently invited conversion and metanoia.
- ▶ Parables provided the vehicle for listeners to grapple with the message and gradually embrace it—to be renewed by it.
- ▶ Those who refuse to repent and cut themselves off from God’s renewal fail to understand the point of the parables.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites reflection on the following questions.

- ▶ Have you ever struggled to accept something you have learned about Scripture or Church teaching only to later come to embrace it and accept it? (If you have not

directly experienced the former, perhaps you might imagine such a scenario.)
What did you learn, or what might you learn from such an experience?

- ▶ What are the implications for your life as a disciple?
- ▶ What advice would you give to others in the same situation?
- ▶ What helped you? What might have helped you?

Parable of wheat and weeds.

- ▶ Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees is an overarching context when considering the meaning of this parable.
- ▶ The Pharisees' strict and oft times self-righteous teaching regarding ritual purity laws conflicted with Jesus' pastoral extension of God's mercy to sinners.
- ▶ The Pharisees simply could not tolerate Jesus' association with sinners.
- ▶ They could not conceive of risking ritual purity by having contact with anything unclean—person or object.
- ▶ The law required that any good Jew whose ritual purity was compromised must perform a ritual bath at the temple or synagogue before declared, "clean" again.
- ▶ Jesus crossed the religious and cultural boundaries of his day and offered salvation to the outcasts of his time. He reached out to sinners and revealed the advent of God's reign.
- ▶ Today's parables are a clarion call for every generation of people who consider themselves spiritually or materially superior to others.
- ▶ Saint and sinner alike are recipients of God's incredible mercy and forgiveness.
- ▶ Only God can judge the hearts of people and that judgment will be made at the end of time.
- ▶ The Christian's response to God's incredible mercy is repentance, conversion and metanoia—a complete turning of one's life toward God—a transformed life—a life lived in the shadow of the cross of Christ.
- ▶ All people are equal citizens in the reign of God.
- ▶ Self-righteous arrogance will not be tolerated.
- ▶ The parable posits a second interpretation: God chooses whom God wills to choose. God decides whom he has chosen to be citizens of the reign of God.
- ▶ God will judge each person in the final judgment.
- ▶ It thus behooves believers to conscientiously live the Gospel, preach the Good News and lay down their lives for one another as they await Christ's return at the end of time.
- ▶ The parable's cast of characters presents Jesus as the sower, the good seed as true believers, and the field as the entire human race.
- ▶ The enemy is Satan and the weeds are those who refuse to accept the Good News and who reject what God is doing in and through Christ.
- ▶ Weeds choke the life from everything in their path. They cause those around them to stagger and fall.
- ▶ God will separate the weeds from the healthy growth at the end of time; evil people will be separated from the righteous.
- ▶ Those who turn their backs on God will be hardened and unable to hear the voice

- of the Master. They will be closed to receiving the message and mission of Christ.
- ▶ God in his mercy continues to invite conversion in the hearts of even the worst sinner.
- ▶ Yes, judgment will come at the end of time, but God is a God of the eleventh hour and in his mercy will still extend the offer of forgiveness to previously unrepentant sinners.
- ▶ Judgment belongs to God, not to the just.
- ▶ Weeds are not to be sorted from the just by the just—that responsibility belongs to God.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ Name a situation in your life or the life of someone you know in which someone was judged or considered “less than” others.
- ▶ Have you ever been tempted to judge someone else or consider another person not as good, smart, competent, diligent, and conscientious as yourself?
- ▶ What damage does this cause to you or the other person?
- ▶ What does this gospel tell us about such behavior?

Parable of the Mustard seed.

- ▶ The mustard seed is a metaphor that emphasizes the way in which the reign of God flourishes from its insignificant origins.
- ▶ The mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds, grows into an immense, eight to ten foot shrub.
- ▶ Conversely, the humble beginnings of Jesus’ kingdom—the miniscule seed--will grow into a mighty shrub.
- ▶ There is an inherent exaggeration in the parable: the mustard shrub is just that—a shrub. It does not tower like a mighty tree whose branches reach heavenward. The mustard shrub is an annual plant that provides health benefits for the harvester, but if allowed to go untended, it will grow out of control like a weed.
- ▶ One cannot miss echoes of the Old Testament metaphor of the reign of God as a huge cedar tree that envelops all life within its branches.
- ▶ Jewish listeners of this parable would have been transported immediately to that image from the Old Testament.
- ▶ They would have been reminded of the towering cedar trees that provide safe haven for nesting birds and whose braches soar toward the heavens.
- ▶ Their Jewish tradition would have reminded them of the universal message of God’s salvation as promised by the prophets.
- ▶ Pagans and Gentiles will be welcomed into the reign of God.

- ▶ The cedar tree evoked images of the once glorious nation of Israel and hopes for its return to its former respected and powerful status.
- ▶ Since the mustard seed hardly evokes such an image of grandeur, what exactly is Jesus trying to communicate?
- ▶ The reign of God is coming but not as Israel expected.
- ▶ The reign of God will not be ushered in by force or might. The reign of God will not be hallmarked by imperial power.
- ▶ The biggest hook in the parable—the hook that would have shocked its listeners to their core is what Jesus was trying to teach them about the reign of God—it will not be ushered in by a show of might and power but by the life, witness and faith of committed disciples of the Lord—those who proclaim the Good News in word and deed.
- ▶ The bottom line in this parable is that God will transform Jesus' ministry. It will grow to immense proportions from its insignificant beginnings. Great things have begun from small, insignificant origins.
- ▶ Even though at first glance it would seem inconceivable that Jesus' ministry could possibly grow to such immense proportions, disciples must simply wait to be surprised—wait and see what God can and will do!

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ Can you name something in your life or the life of someone you know that started off very small and insignificant but grew into something wonderful?
- ▶ What does that say to you about the power of God in human affairs?

Parable of the leaven.

- ▶ Like the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven echoes profound Old Testament themes and breathes new meaning into them for the Christian.
- ▶ Leaven was understood as a symbol of evil's ability to infect and spread.
- ▶ Jesus' detractors believed that his ministry to sinners was a corrupting force.
- ▶ The religious leaders feared that Jesus was upsetting the religious status quo.
- ▶ Jesus' preaching and healing, like leaven affected whatever it touched.
- ▶ Like leaven, the reign he came to establish grew into something brand new, while not losing its ties with the old.
- ▶ The amount of dough is plentiful enough to provide for the needs of a large banquet.
- ▶ The Old Testament is resplendent with images of the reign of God as a great banquet.
- ▶ The leaven that was hidden in the dough may be "hidden" to those who refuse to believe, but its effects are not hidden. In due time they will become obvious.
- ▶ Once again Jesus tells another story to get his listener's attention. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened." In one sentence he evoked several very ancient stories that would have been familiar to his audience.
- ▶ Jesus introduced new terms to the traditional meaning and in so doing

transformed the old into something radically new.

- ▶ Three measures of flour are equivalent to about a bushel of flour (ephaph). A bushel of flour is a large amount of flour capable of making a lot of bread—enough for a large celebration—a large gathering.
- ▶ Abraham commanded that an ephaph of flour be made for the angels of God at Mamre. Gideon brought the same amount to the Lord at Ophrah. Hanna sent Samuel with three measures of flour when she presented him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. David brought an ephaph of flour to his army when they engaged the Philistines. An ephaph of flour constitutes an extraordinary baking. Ezekiel prophesied that an ephaph of flour would be baked by the priests apart from the people for the new temple he envisioned.
- ▶ An ephaph was baked into loaves. Gideon presented unleavened loaves for the burnt offering. Abraham and Sarah had no time to wait for the bread to rise, thus it was unleavened as well. The Torah required that the cereal offering be unleavened.
- ▶ While unleavened bread was considered a holy object, leavened bread could have the opposite connotation. It could be a symbol of corruption and wickedness.
- ▶ Consider that Zechariah was shown an ephaph of flour as a sign of the sin of God's people. A reverse, opposite image of Ezekiel's new temple was given when Zechariah insisted that because of Israel's sin an ephaph of flour would be sent to Babylon—the antithesis of the new temple and the restored Israel. Adding insult to injury Zechariah insisted that the flour would be further corrupted by the image of a woman sitting in the flour. The angel then decried: "This is Wickedness!" (5:7-8). There could be no more unclean image: leavened bread in a pagan, unclean land in which sat an unclean woman!
- ▶ It is no wonder that Jesus' one line was cause for such astonishment. When he likened the reign of God to *leavened bread baked by a woman*. The entire meal—enough for Gideon, Abraham, David and the other saints of old was leavened. Herein lies the parable's hook.
- ▶ The bread is as unclean as death by crucifixion. Yet it will be a feast for all of God's people who long to see God face-to-face--just as Jesus' unclean horrific death is transformed into a similar feast for the life of the world.
- ▶ The reign of God is certainly not what was expected.
- ▶ The reign of God comes bringing radical love, radical grace and radical new life for believers, outsiders and sinners.
- ▶ Worldly dominions (even religious institutions) are guilty of establishing boundaries. Worldly kingdoms are comprised of insiders and outsiders.
- ▶ In Jesus' dominion there are no outsiders. Saints and sinners are welcome.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ What are the implications associated with the line that states: “The bread is as unclean as death by crucifixion?”
- ▶ In what way if any have you ever experienced the reign of God as bringing radical love, radical grace and radical new life for believers, outsiders and sinners?
- ▶ Have you ever had the experience in your own life in which someone was good leaven and led you to grow in ways you never imagined?
- ▶ Have you ever had someone in your life that was a corrupting leaven?
- ▶ What does this tell you about the way you respond to those with whom you live, work, pray and play?
- ▶ What does that tell you about your role in the reign of God?

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about what it means to live in the kingdom of God?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the Christian mission?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- In what way if any have you ever experienced the reign of God as bringing radical love, radical grace and radical new life for believers, outsiders and sinners?

We are a Church that manifests God's reign in the world. Two examples of God's radical love, radical grace and radical new life come to mind. Many years ago a man who was waiting outside for the holy fire of the Easter Vigil spoke of his utter grief to his sponsor. On Good Friday he discovered that the love of his life—the love he had waited for years to find—was diagnosed with terminal cancer and had mere weeks to live. I thank God that the Church I know and love offers the compassion of God to one who is angry with God over a tragic loss in life. The psalms are a testament to such anger. God's shoulders are big; God understands. Yet sadly this sponsor was unable to communicate God's love and compassion to this broken man. The sponsor proceeded to chastise him for his feelings toward God on such a wonderful night of rebirth.

Thank God this broken elect of God told others of his sponsor's hurtful admonitions. Other people were able to communicate God's loving kindness and understanding in the face of such sadness. Those great disciples offered healing and the compassion of God's kingdom to a bruised soul.

Another situation occurred when a man came to us seeking a different face of God than the one that was presented to him when he lost a child to suicide. He too was angry with God and was questioning why God would allow such a tragedy. A friend and fellow church companion from his former church of origin told him that his anger with God meant the loss of his soul and that he would be damned along with his son. She told him that she would no longer be his friend. Zechariah's image of wickedness of the highest order comes to mind when it comes to such a horrific response. She effectively considered this man an outsider and a sinner beyond redemption. She was hardly an image of radical love and radical grace and he certainly did not experience the reign of God that Jesus' intended to establish.

This broken child of God did, however, experience that compassion in our community. Wonderful disciples of the Lord reached out to him and offered their love, encouragement and support in the face of so tragic a loss.

The reign of God Jesus came to establish is flourishing today from its humble origins; the small seed has indeed grown into a towering tree. Jesus' caution that the shrub needs to be tended or else it will be overgrown with weeds is as prevalent today as it was then. I shudder to think of how many terrible things have happened to God's people in his name. Some Christians have been poor ambassadors of his heritage.

However, many more have offered Christ's radical love and grace and have offered it with the sweat of their brow and their life's blood. When two or more are gathered in his name and preaching the loving compassion of the Good News the dominion of God is alive and flourishing in our midst.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Kingdom of God

Sin and Grace

Morality

Moral Decision Making

Holy Spirit

Faith

Evangelization

Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The parables in today's Gospel illustrate what it means to live in the kingdom of God. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

SIN AND GRACE

The parable of the wheat and weeds is a reminder that those who are just grow along side those who have chosen to reject God. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what it means to be righteous in the eyes of God. We do that by focusing our attention on what the Church teaches us about SIN AND GRACE.

MORALITY

Today's parable focus on what it means to grow up along side those who have not chosen to live righteously. How do we know what is righteous and moral and what is not? We turn to the Church for guidance. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches MORALITY.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

Today's parable focus on what it means to grow up along side those who have not chosen to live righteously. How do we know what is righteous and moral and what is not? Upon what do we base our decisions? We turn to the Church for guidance. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches MORAL DECISIONS.

HOLY SPIRIT

Paul continues to remind the Romans that the Holy Spirit dwells within us and is the indwelling of God within each person. The Spirit knows our hearts better than we know our own hearts. The Spirit prays in the hearts of God's children even when they are unable or do not know how to pray. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the HOLY SPIRIT.

FAITH

Jesus tells stories of the kingdom—stories intended to show us what it means to live in the kingdom he came to establish and stories that invite conversion of heart. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about FAITH.

EVANGELIZATION

The kingdom is not an ostentatious realm of imperial power, it is a small venture of committed, faith-filled people living the word and promoting the gospel by word and deed. This is the kingdom Jesus preached. A kingdom that went forth by word and deed. We are still called to preach the kingdom just as Jesus preached the kingdom. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about EVANGELIZATION.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.